Understanding History through Lucy’s Eyes

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TLT 412: Social Studies in Elementary Education

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**Conclusion 1:** Teachers must build confidence with students to encourage them to try to answer questions even what they are unsure of their answer.

**Conclusion 2:** Students tend to learn conceptually when learning social studies rather than in a fact-by-fact manner.

Seeing history through a child’s eyes is a challenging endeavor, but through an interview with a kindergarten student (alias Lucy) one is introduced to a world of considerations that are critical to consider as a pre-service social studies teacher. Lucy divulged much information though a simple picture-sorting task and social studies questions including the importance of confidence on student responding and the need for a focus on conceptual learning in the social studies. Furthermore, her excitement to participate revealed a love of social studies learning that is not often noted in young students. Upon further investigation, students reported that social studies is their second favorite school subject exceeded only by science (Chapin, 2006). Perhaps through attention to generalizations for teaching social studies gained through the present interview, student success in the social studies will match interest levels.

During the picture sorting task, the interviewer observed that Lucy was hesitant to respond. Even when presented with only the first two images (one showing a World War II (WWII) air force crew next to a jet and the other showing the first Thanksgiving) the student knew the order, but was afraid to respond. She said phrases like, “I don’t know,” and “I’m not really sure;” however, once she gave it a try, she responded correctly. In fact, after sorting three additional pictures into the timeline (a renaissance band, a photo from Occupy Wall Street, and Rosa Parks on a bus) only two pictures were out of order (Rosa Parks and WWII) which were meant as challenge items above her expected level of accuracy. Lucy was not only competent at ordering historical images at a kindergarten level, but exceeded the expectations for her success demonstrating that she had little reason to feel unconfident towards the task. So, what was Lucy afraid of?

Aukerman (2006) suggested that today’s students are so often given expectations of clear success that they are often fearful when the risk of incorrect responding is present. The author indicated that students are rarely encouraged to think in a free manner during elementary years, which leads to a lack of confidence in their independent opinions. Aukerman went on to propose that teachers should offer students frequent opportunities to respond (OTR) where correct and incorrect answers are either non-present or unclear. In this way, the author suggested that students would feel encouraged to have individual thoughts on subject matters at school rather than simply adopting that of the teacher.

In Lucy’s case, as she responded successfully she developed an increased level of confidence towards providing the next response. For example, the first response took approximately four minutes to elicit while the next answer (after indicating her previous response was correct) took less than one minute. This finding is similar to the research of Douglas, Wilson, and Ennis (2012) who suggested that teachers use multiple choice pretests or formative assessments not only as assessment tools, but as means for building confidence and increasing student response rates during classes related to the topic. With these findings, teachers should consider providing opportunities for students to have explicit successes with course material in order to motivate students to become engaged during class time and provide timely responding. Furthermore, Tevini and Losh (2003) found that increases in self-confidence are correlated with increased student motivation and academic success. Clearly, by increasing rates of success for students, teachers can develop increased response rates, motivation, and academic success for students in their classes.

Another important implication from Lucy’s reluctance to respond is present in student labeling. Lucy is a gifted student who is often noted as such by teachers, family, and friends. Even during the interview, the interviewer used prompts such as calling Lucy a smart girl, a whiz, and a superstar to motivate her to respond by highlighting her intelligence. Unfortunately, research showed such labels are detrimental not only to peers but also to the target student (Heyman, 2008). Labeling students with success labels is commonly observed as detrimental to peers by developing a label on non-labeled students that they are not as smart or able to succeed. This inability title and the tendency of students to lose motivation and create truth from the label is commonly referred to as a ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ (Wilkens, 1976). Similarly, Heyman (2008) suggested that these labels created a similar effect for those with the positive labels. Students classified as smart often are stressed by the expectation for their success and develop fears of inaccurate responses. Sometimes, these students will refrain from providing answers they are not 100% sure of in order to avoid disappointed adults who provide these labels. In such, positive labels may also provide detrimental effects to those being labeled. In Lucy’s case, calling her smart as a motivator may have resulted in an increased hesitation to respond, providing more evidence for such an effect of positive labels.

Considering the possibility of detriments to both successful and unsuccessful students associated with the use of positive labels, teachers should consider avoiding label use at all costs. Classification of student as a smartie or whiz is likely unnecessary and with the inefficacy of the terms to elicit positive results from any students, such terms become uncomplimentary and simply insults and stressors. Teachers should only use these terms if they are being applied to the entire population present in order to deter any negative effects. Motivators need to be re-evaluated for gifted students to delineate those that increase response stress as opposed to those that facilitate general motivation and pride.

Lucy revealed more than just a need to foster confidence in her interview; she exposed the presence of conceptual learning as a chief learning mechanism for young students. When asked particular questions about the social studies, Lucy often referred to stories she learned in school through literature, story-telling, and media. For example, when asked about Martin Luther King Jr., Lucy said she didn’t know who that was but that it made her think of a story. From there, she told recited the story of Rosa Parks in more detail than is typically recalled. She knew the concepts of civil inequality struggles and instances of such challenges in the civil rights movement, but did not know facts. She couldn’t name Rosa Parks or Martin Luther King Jr., but clearly remembered the story. She said she heard this in a non-fiction book read aloud in class—conceptual learning through literature.

A second example was present in her understanding of economics. She did not understand the facts of banks and what they really did, and simply stated that when you put money there, you got back more referring to the concept of earning interest. She told me she learned this from a story they saw in a movie at school where someone went back in time and put money in the bank and when they went back to the present they had a lot more money. From this, she understood about interest and that it took a lot of time to get a lot of money. She said the teacher even told the students about real people who did this kind of thing by finding people on the internet who put money in the bank for as long as 100 years (obviously an exaggeration) and got back a whole bunch of money. Clearly, Lucy learned with concepts and stories rather than understanding simple facts.

The previous examples are consistent with the findings of Birbili (2007) who suggested that early childhood classrooms must have a conceptual learning focus and not a factual learning focus. The author indicated that young students are more likely to remember ideas that they can apply and relate to their own lives or play experiences. Only after internalizing the concepts of a subject can students move on to developing factual, long-term knowledge. With such, teachers must develop conceptual learning in order to facilitate eventual factual knowledge acquisition in young students.

One way to develop conceptual learning is through the incorporation of literature into social studies learning. Quinteto (2010) found that children (especially younger children) learn more through stories than other means. Using children’s literature, teachers were able to instruct students on concepts in multiple curricular areas such as science and social studies. Even advanced concepts, such as inquiry-based learning, have successfully been taught through the incorporation of literature (Zarnowski & Turkel, 2011). Zarnowski and Turkel showed that by reading non-fiction literature to school children, the students were able to understand how real people solved real world problems. Even sensitive topics such as cultural acceptance and understanding have successful roots in literature (Buck, et al., 2011). Using international and intercultural children’s literature helped both teachers and students to develop an increased understanding of different cultures and communities while it facilitated sensitivity towards people identifying as such. Without doubt, children’s literature is an effective means for developing conceptual knowledge of a large range of ideas in young children.

Another method for conceptual learning focus is the incorporation of genuine media into social studies lessons. Quinteto (2004) suggested that students are surrounded by civil knowledge through television, the internet, and newspapers. The author continued to say that children are extremely cognizant of the media and do not ignore it. With such, teachers should highlight the media and use it to teach concepts through current events. Media experiences reflect background knowledge and experiences which are often equally distributed across all students in the classroom—especially local events. By emphasizing such news in the classroom, students will understand the concepts of which the events tend to define. For instance, one teacher used the Occupy Movement to highlight constitutional freedoms such as the rights for freedom of speech and assembly in her fourth grade class (Bellows, Baumi, Field & Ledbetter, 2012). In this way, the teacher successfully taught about freedoms using media and current events that provided students with equal background knowledge for which to connect the new conceptual learning.

Undoubtedly, the interview with Lucy was very revealing with regards to best practices for teaching social studies to young students effectively. Lucy made clear the need to build and foster student confidence in order to achieve engaging response rates for students. Similarly, her discussion noted the prevalence of conceptual learning over factual learning for a student of her developmental level. The most important part of being a good, effective teacher is to know one’s students. Only through talking directly to the population can a teacher understand the needs of that group of students. History and the social studies are different through the eyes of a child than that of an adult, and different through the eyes of different children; however, generalizations for effective instruction can be made through interviews with each student. Lucy’s eyes for history were revealing and provided a new level of clarity for which teachers of the social studies must respect and consider for developing effective social studies curricula and pedagogies.

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